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## GREEK CULTURE AND AMERICAN “CULTUROLOGY”: JAMES FAUBION’S *MODERN GREEK LESSONS*

This paper is built around an assessment of James D. Faubion’s *Modern Greek Lessons: a primer in historical constructivism* (Faubion, 1993). In reviewing Faubion’s book, it will attempt to provide an account of the problems and limitations of traditional anthropological focus and methods (against which Faubion has reacted) for the study of modern Greek society, and at the same time to point to some of the difficulties entailed by Faubion’s approach. Central to the paper’s discussion will be a consideration of what Faubion means by “culture”, of the vexed status of “culture” in contemporary anthropology, and of the possibilities of defining what could be meant by “modern Greek culture”.

Any discipline that makes its living out of the intellectual analysis of the forms of quotidian life — and Anthropology is a prime candidate — is bound to be in a state of continual crisis. To an extent the crisis is self-induced: who wants yesterday’s theories? (Unless, possibly, one is outside France and they happen to be French.) At the least academic advancement will not square with filial piety, and “killing the Da” has become an institutional practice. But in fairness the crisis is also externally induced, for what Anthropology studies is itself as subject to change as are the means by which it is studied. Thus it has always been; but there are periods when (and places where) the changes appear to be so rapid and so radical that theoretical disarray might present itself as a quite legitimate response. “Post-modernism” in general has fed off that apprehension, not least by ambiguously labelling both a condition of the world and its own intellectualisation of it. Being profoundly elitist, it naturally elides the distinction: academic disenchantment must be the register of a disenchanted world. Nonetheless, the world does change, and in Greece it appears to have changed very quickly; quickly enough to have caught anthropology on the hop; certainly quickly enough to allow some deft outflanking manoeuvres within the discipline.

Consider a simple statistic. In 1951 47.5 per cent of Greece's total population lived in villages of less than two thousand inhabitants; by 1981 probably forty per cent of Greece's total population lived in a single city, Athens (*Statistical Yearbook of Greece*, 1971 and 1984).<sup>1</sup> This is, of course, a simple statistic — merely a convenient demographic index of much more complex socio-economic and (to use a key word) “cultural” changes. Allow also that probably as many Greeks (depending on how one counts them) live outside Greece as live inside Greece — and not just “overseas” in America, Australia, Canada, and South Africa, but also in Germany, Belgium, France, Scandinavia and the UK from where their contributions, both fiscal and “cultural”, to their *patridha* are quite immediate.<sup>2</sup> Allow, as a corollary to the above, that Greece's ruling class, certainly its hegemonic class, is largely overseas or internationally educated — and bilingual or trilingual.<sup>3</sup> Allow that over 6.5 million tourists enter Greece every year (Kenna, 1993). Allow that Greece is now a full member of the EU (European Union), and that Athens was the first “European Capital” — which means, whatever the resistances, that Greece has become integrated into Brussels' ideal of a transnational unity, and certainly penetrated by the EU multinational capitalism that always lay behind that ideal. Allow also the much touted technological explosion of communications, of “the media”, whether radio, television, computer facilities, or even the dear old printed word: not only Derrida in translation, but perhaps more importantly Mills and Boon. My point is an obvious one. Whatever Greece is, it is no longer defined by rural villages. It is predominantly urban. And to be urban in today's Europe is to be, and especially in Greece, in some significant senses both “international” and “modern”.

<sup>1</sup>The 1981 census shows Greater Athens accounting for thirty-one per cent of the nation's total population, but in practical terms this is a substantial underestimate since a considerable proportion of Athens' more recent immigrants return to their natal villages on census day.

<sup>2</sup>For a concise account of Greek International emigration, see Vgenopoulos, 1984.

<sup>3</sup>I can give no statistics here, but the return to Greece by an overseas and internationally trained intelligentsia — politicians, civil servants, academics, professionals — in the wake of the 1981 PASOK victory and its catch-cry of “Change” was notable. Papandreou himself, of course, provides a paradigm example.

When John Campbell and his wife, Sheila Campbell, did their fieldwork in Northern Epiros in 1952, they were the first non-Greeks, the first “Frangi”, whom the Sarakatsani had ever seen (Campbell, 1964). To relate that today to contemporary Athenians is to relate something as remote from their lives as accounts of Stanley in Africa.

So where does that leave anthropology? Not at all, I think, in the lurch. There are those who annually prophecy the demise of anthropology on the grounds that the “natives” are no more. Anthropologists themselves from Malinowski onwards have also been occasionally smitten by forebodings of an homogenised “modernity”.<sup>4</sup> But in the end there seems little to justify either the malice or the doubt. “Sub-cultures” proliferate at an alarming rate; national cultures and regional cultures both assert and maintain their uniqueness in almost inverse proportion to bureaucratic calls for uniformity. In the end people seem committed to remaining people through the continual construction and reconstruction of an amazing social diversity whose invention may well be the hallmark of our species. There is no problem there. But for anthropology there are other problems — not, perhaps “theoretical”, but certainly a little more than just methodological, for anthropologists have generally been happier dealing with small-scale societies and communities which, though not necessarily homogeneous, at least made it plausible for statements about the part to be read as statements about the whole, and which, though not necessarily *sui generis*, at least appeared to be self-contained, and in themselves to constitute some sort of “whole”. Traditional methods — “fieldwork”, “participant observation”, the prolonged first-hand involvement in the entire daily round of an entire “people's” activities — pushed anthropologists in that direction; so too did their aims — the documentation and analysis of a way of life; the laying bare of a

<sup>4</sup>See the opening remarks in the “Foreword” (dated April 1921) to Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Malinowski, 1922: xv) generally held to be the first “modern” fieldwork based ethnography: “Ethnology is in the sadly ludicrous, not to say tragic, position, that at the very moment when it begins to put its workshop in order, to forge its proper tools, to start ready for work on its appointed task, the material of its study melts away with hopeless rapidity”. For a recent version of this view, see, for example, Giddens, 1997.

community's "social structure"; the delineation of a particular "culture". So too did "theory" (in as much as it was articulated) — the assumption that a people's institutions, beliefs, values, practices were mutually sustaining, functionally integrated; the assumption that everything made sense "in context", that context being everything else that was there. Hence, in Europe, the anthropological preponderance of village studies; hence, on the whole, the anthropological avoidance of the cities; hence over the last two decades growing criticisms both within and without the discipline that range from charges of exoticism through to myopia or simple irrelevance.<sup>5</sup>

Personally I have no problem at least with the choice of studying a rural village; after all that's exactly what I did. But there are plenty of problems with how one goes about presenting such a study, for in fact we all now realise that village societies are not societies, they are part societies; they are not self-contained social units, they are integrated in any number of ways into national and international structures; and whatever the institutions, beliefs, values and practices are that operate at the village level — call them all "culture" — they are not explicable solely by reference to their mutual coexistence within their local context. Village studies have to be situated in some wider canvas — and I think they can be. To choose to study a rural village is still, I think, a valid choice; but there is little point in pretending that it can be anthropology's exclusive choice, or we shall find ourselves marginalised as the studiers of the marginal. Enter James Faubion's *Modern Greek Lessons: a primer in historical constructivism*, hot out of Princeton University Press in 1993, Faubion himself hot out of Rice University, the most anthropologically avant-garde of avant-garde centres,<sup>6</sup> and protege of Paul Rabinow, author of *French Modern* (Rabinow, 1989), and commentator on Foucault (Rabinow, 1986).

*Modern Greek Lessons* is an infuriating book. Certainly it infuriated one Greek commentator in *To Vima* who drew up a list of its

<sup>5</sup>For a general critique of European anthropology, see Goddard, Llobera and Shore, 1994.

<sup>6</sup>Sometimes referred to as the "Rice School", and most notably represented by George Marcus, Michael Fischer, and Stephen Tyler, examples of whose work, along with that of Paul Rabinow, may be found in Clifford and Marcus, 1986.

factual solecisms, which include thinking that, or at least writing that, "Platia Filikis Eterias" is one and the same place as "Dhexamenis" (Pesmazoglou, 1994) — but I doubt it was intended to infuriate Greek scholars even though Faubion does state that he would not consider *Modern Greek Lessons* a complete failure even if his Greek colleagues uniformly disparaged it — only if they entirely and blithely ignored it (Faubion, 1993: 20). It was, I suspect, intended to infuriate old village-hands such as myself — "pastoralists" as he sometimes calls us, certainly myopic "particularists" (Faubion, 1993: 105–7) — for Faubion stations himself at the centre of things, not only in Athens, but amongst the intellectual elite of Kolonaki from which vantage point, already "on the Margins of Europe" (as he ironically comments), there is no need to go further. Well, nice work if you can get it, I suppose — but I'm only being a bit sour because in fact I want to defend his project not only as a piece of urban anthropology but as a form of anthropology that addresses issues larger than parish-pump politics, larger than the particularisms that he despises, and that somehow does try to get the measure of modern Greece. But the task is daunting. How does one describe, let alone analyse, the fragmented disarray of contemporary Athenian urban and urbane life? The traditional anthropological tool-kit seems sadly empty, not only methodologically (how can "participant observation" embrace Athens' diversity and complexity?) but also conceptually (what on earth would "Athenian culture" amount to on any model analogous to the normative renderings of "culture" — those shared institutions, values, practices, beliefs, strategies — derived from village studies?). How to order the cacophony of voices and views? How to grasp anything so Hydra-headed? And yet assuredly there is something to be grasped, something to be "comprehended", or else we are placed in the untenable position of saying that all complexities are the same by virtue of their complexity; that life in London or Melbourne or New York or Paris or Rome is all the same because none of them can be reduced to a single model and all converge in their incoherence. And that is not so — they do have their particular-ness.

I have mentioned the term "post-modernism" and I have mentioned it because I have no doubt that some people will read Faubion's work

as “post-modern”. To an extent it invites such a reading if only because of its confrontation with the kaleidoscopic diversity of contemporary Athenian life. In fact Faubion is not a post-modernist; he is quite explicitly a Weberian, or at least a neo-Weberian, and the question he poses, the question that allows him to approach his topic, is an essentially Weberian one — not “what is Athenian culture?”, not “what is Greek culture”, not “what are the commonalities that could be placed together in an attempt to give substance to such notions?”, but rather what is the specific form of historical consciousness that results in Modern Greece’s particular form of modernism. His answer: “historical constructivism”.

This requires some explanation (indeed most of the book is devoted to its explanation), but let me try in a few words. Political, sociological, even anthropological studies of Greece — not least those written by Greek social scientists — tend to place Greece in a sort of limbo — a modern secular “western” state, but yet not “quite” modern, its institutions, its practices shot through with the residual impedimenta of a pre-modern age: politics are personalised; the bureaucracy clientalised; the economy anything but rationalised (Faubion, 1993: 104–7). And yet, undeniably, it is a highly sophisticated society, a highly self-conscious society, a highly cosmopolitan society. And for Faubion, following Weber, it is unambiguously and irrevocably a “modern” society in that “the legitimacy of a divinely preordained and fated cosmos” has collapsed; the taken-for-grantedness of an “ethically oriented cosmos” no longer exists (Faubion, 1993: 115). To put matters in a slightly different way, a form of historical consciousness has been arrived at in terms of which history itself is entirely contingent on human agency. Humanity is on its own, required not to live out an existing world, but consciously to create it and take responsibility for it. Greece, like the rest of the west, has passed that “quite distinct moment: one in which traditions, however dearly cherished, and however rigorously maintained, cease to be their own defence; one in which tradition itself ceases to serve as the ultimate court of ethical or existential appeal” (Faubion, 1993: 116). But, so Faubion argues, having passed the threshold of modernity, Greece has followed a different trajectory, created another form of modernity. Never

having had a protestant reformation, never having developed a strong indigenous capitalist class, Greece has not gone the road of European and American bureaucratic rationalism which obliterates the past in the name of calculable, means-end tested progress. It has instead developed a modernity, which Faubion calls “historical constructivism”, a continual fashioning of the new out of the debris of the old, a continual redeployment of historical *concreta* into some new but inevitably transient synthesis. But this is not a “traditional” society — far from it, for tradition is no longer the guiding hand of unreflective conduct. It is itself squarely placed in inverted commas, an objectified item to be reused to fashion a world every bit as historically contingent as the rest of the West’s. An aside here: Faubion is not, as I have said, himself a post-modernist, but his version of Greek modernism does seem to make it discernibly similar to what others elsewhere see in the post-modern condition: a knowing world of parody and pastiche, of synthesis and bricolage, where the only way one has to speak is in quotation marks.

Well, an interesting idea — and grand social theory too. Nor have I done Faubion justice in turning several hundred pages into a few paragraphs. But as an anthropologist rather than as a social theorist or a philosopher I am interested in where and when all this touches down in reality. And the answer is not often and in some pretty odd places. Faubion is careful to state that *Modern Greek Lessons* is neither an ethnography nor a work of ethnology; but he is keen to state that he considers *Modern Greek Lessons* to be a work of anthropology — a contribution to the anthropology of ethics, of modernisation and modernity, and of Greece (Faubion, 1993: xxiii–xxiv). But if it is anthropology it is an anthropology notably short on *anthropoi*. Most of Part One of the book, “Reviewing Athens”, consists of a sort of intellectual’s guided tour of Athens’ architecture, of places and spaces, not of people. Those places and spaces act as catalysts for long philosophical disquisitions on the nature of modernity and for dialogues with Weber, Fustel de Coulanges, Habermas *et al.* — but we are decidedly in the company of Faubion alone. And whilst assuredly Athens architecture is a pastiche of styles, of borrowed elements and historical references, so is the architecture of most cities, Melbourne included (Canberra, admittedly, excluded). Part Two, “Another

modernity”, contains one vignette, a curious and interesting confrontation between the patrons of a particular discotheque, *aerodhromio*, and those who protested the discotheque’s decadence to the accompaniment of amplified *dhemotiki mousiki* and banners proclaiming *Theloume Skholia, Okhi Dhiafthoria* — for Faubion, and perhaps quite correctly, a quintessentially “Greek Modern” confrontation. But for the rest we are back with ruminations on the nature of the modern prompted by snippets of history or the odd remark made by one of Faubion’s intellectual friends. Only in Part Three, “After the colonels: projects of self-definition and self-formation since 1974”, does Faubion make any serious attempt empirically to ground his reflections on the nature of “Greek Modern” in the lives of others: but it takes a decidedly odd form — the sketch of a composite character, Maro, drawn from five of Faubion’s friends, a sort of mini ideal-type biography of the non-conformist; then a literary critical assessment — for all I know a good one — of the works of Margharita Karapanou; and finally an essay on homosexuality and the Khristos Roussos “Angel” affair drawn largely from newspaper reportage. All prolong the theme of self-creation in Greek Modern mode; all, I should say, act as a substantive correctives to an anthropology of Greece that not only takes as its locus of investigation the increasingly atypical back-waters of rural society but also frames them in terms of predetermined and deterministic rules, roles, values and concepts. We would not thus capture our own society; we cannot pretend thus to capture Greek society. And yet I worry. In the “Introduction” Faubion remarks, disingenuously of course:

Might I, in the furtherance of my biases, simply have stayed to reflect and to write about those neoromantic impulses now prevalent, and by which I am apparently affected, at home? I might have, I suppose: but as Bourdieu has remarked, practitioners can never really know what they are doing until they get away from what they are doing. Had I not gotten away and gone to Athens, I would really never have known how very truncated and distorted my North American exercise of a historically grounded imagination in fact remains.

(Faubion, 1993: 12)

Quite so. But Bourdieu, in his own way, is also a stickler for empirical method.<sup>7</sup> Actually I think Faubion could have stayed home, not because I begrudge him his coffee and his company in Kolonaki Square (or do we mean *Dheksamini*?), but because in the end the only thing that gives *Modern Greek Lessons* coherence is Faubion’s own hyper-literate voice. As an anthropologist, I still look for an order in the world, however complex, shifting, uncertain. So, to be fair, does Faubion. And in the end, like Faubion, I think that confronted by the complexities of a city like Athens — or Melbourne, or New York, or Paris — we have failed. Novelists, I have to admit, do it better. But if, for all its brilliance, I can no longer see John Campbell’s *Honour, Family and Patronage* (Campbell, 1964) as the definitive model for future anthropological studies of Greece, I am not yet ready to retreat to viewing Montesquieu’s *Lettres Persanes* (Montesquieu, 1721) as a paradigm. As anthropologists we have always been imaginative purveyors of other people’s cultures, but crucial to that has been the attempt to access other people’s imaginations. That, to my mind, remains an empirical task and one that Faubion has signally not fulfilled.

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## TSITSANIS AND THE BIRTH OF THE "NEW" *LAÏKO TRAGOUDI*

"[...] πού γίνεται σήμερα λαϊκό γλέντι σε σπίτι ή σε συγκέντρωση χωρίς ρεμπέτικο τραγούδι, μιας κι' αυτό με το ζωντανό περιεχόμενο του συγκινεί και εκφράζει την λαϊκή ψυχή;"  
(Politis, 1947)

"Τα ρεμπέτικα του Τσιτσάνη είναι ένα μουσικό είδος άξιοπρόσεχτο και μεστό από καλλιτεχνική ουσία."  
(Spanoudi, 1951)

"[...] καίτοι το ρεμπέτικο έχει κάποια δόση λαϊκότητας —γιατί εκφράζει τα συναισθήματα μιας ομάδας ανθρώπων— δεν είναι λαϊκό τραγούδι."  
(Letter to Avgi: 1/4/61)

The preceding comments from various Greek newspapers about *laïko tragoudi* and *rebetika* — of which there is an abundance — highlight and reflect the assumptions, the different perceptions and usages of the various terms that have been used since at least the turn of this century, to define the different forms of Greek music. They also represent the conflicts that ensued for over two decades in the post-War era over the question of what was "real" or "authentic" Greek music and what was not. These were issues that appeared to be concerned with musical genres and their exponents; what they were really about, however, were issues of nationhood, national identity, cultural inviolability and historical integrity. In that sense and in that context, the discussion about musical genres was highly relevant to the modern Greek's perception of himself and could, therefore, become highly political as a result.

This study is concerned with examining how the terms *laïko tragoudi* and *rebetika* have been variously used since the late 1940s, particularly in the popular press. It will trace the evolution of these terms, especially in response to and with reference to the life and work of Vasilis Tsitsanis. Tsitsanis' career is, in fact, an excellent representation of the ambivalent usage of these terms and how they can,